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ABSTRACT

The interlanguage hypothesis stresses that errors are a normal part of the language learning process. At the same time, in the view of many, the teacher has a responsibility to provide short cuts for the learner through appropriate corrective feedback. Conventionally, this has been taken to imply correction of expression by requiring repetition of the desired form. However, the teacher's insistence on grammatical accuracy may set up a conflict with the student's own search for communicative efficiency. Parents correct the content of their young children's speech in ways that respect the children's attempts at communication. Teachers might formalize techniques such as expansion and paraphrase from the correction procedures of parents, particularly when the student's attempts at communication are all intelligible but still deviant at times. It is suggested that the most promising way of getting students to accept precision as a worthwhile goal, without denigrating their achievement in establishing some sort of communicative competence, is to adopt a functional approach that shows how grammatical form contributes to meaning. (Author/AMH)

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WHAT SHOULD TEACHERS DO ABOUT MIGRANTS' ATTEMPTS AT COMMUNICATION?

D.R. Richards

Many language teachers have undoubtedly had the experience of presenting a particular point such as how to ask a question, of drilling it and following up, in short, of doing everything one is supposed to do, only to be asked at the end of the lesson, "What we have to do for homework?" The question this paper addresses is what the teacher should do in such a case.

What one does depends on how one views the nature of errors - which is the unfortunate label we give to the migrant student's attempts at "real" communication in English when they differ from what a native speaker would say in the same situation. In the heyday of the "New Key" - and let us not forget that a good deal of material still in use today is based on this psychology - the theorists tried to sweep the problem under the carpet: if the input to the learner were properly planned and his output controlled by the teacher, the problem should never arise - at least in class. Unfortunately, unless someone comes up with the perfect training schedule (which is unlikely in the present state of knowledge), it must be assumed that errors are a normal, even inevitable, part of learning, if only because the complete process takes time, so that until the whole language is learned, the potential for error exists every time the learner attempts to say something which his previous experience has not fitted him for.

More recently, the interlanguage hypothesis has gone further. It says that errors are *necessary*, because, as Pit Corder [1967, p.167] puts it, they are "a way the learner has of testing his hypotheses about the nature of the language he is learning". Now it should be made clear straight away that the interlanguage hypothesis recognises two types of "deviant behaviour". One is the performance lapses which supposedly even any native speaker is liable to, especially when he is not fully concentrating on what he is saying. It is the second type - *systematic* errors, due to genuine discrepancies between the native speaker's internalised knowledge of the rules of grammar and the learner's current attempt at replicating that deep-seated system [cf. Corder, 1967] - which the interlanguage hypothesis sees as signs of hypothesis-testing. The distinction is important for this discussion, because it appears that recommendations as to the treatment of student performance which conflicts with desired target language behaviour have been framed as if *all* differences were systematic. Thus, we have at least one proponent of the interlanguage hypothesis, Cooper [1970, p.312], suggesting that the teacher should "permit, and indeed *encourage*, the learner to produce sentences that are ungrammatical from the point of view of the target language" (my emphasis). The only reason I can see for such an extreme proposal when the ultimate goal is presumably error-free performance in the target language (henceforth abbreviated TL) is that the teacher intends to provide some sort of feedback which will put the learner on the right path. But that is not the way the interlanguage hypothesis views the treatment of error. I use the term "treatment of error" here, rather than "correction", because the interlanguage hypothesis,

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true to its nativist foundations, suggests the teacher should not bother at all. If errors are the outcome of insufficient knowledge of the TL, then the solution is simply more learning [cf. Corder, 1967; Newmark & Reibel, 1968].

This line of reasoning seems to me to be dubious, and even misguided in the unfortunate methodological proposals it leads to. To begin with, successful prediction from a limited sample requires both positive and negative feedback. Furthermore, the feedback must be accurate. Negative feedback is crucial if the learner is to have any grounds for rejecting hypothetical grammars which are "over-inclusive", that is, grammars which generate all the sentences of the language, but some non-sentences as well [cf. Braine, 1970, p.157]. All the acceptable sentences the student hears around him would therefore appear as positive confirmation of such a hypothetical grammar (though performance lapses would presumably be misleading, since they are not usually signalled as negative instances). Consequently, it is only from *negative* feedback that the learner could find out when it would be incorrect to use a given form [cf. Wilkins, 1974].

Ultimately, to leave errors to work themselves out with time is to forsake one's professional responsibility as a teacher, for the definitive language learning achievement of most adults would then *not* be the TL grammar but an interlanguage (abbreviated IL), which they could arrive at if left to their own devices (though perhaps more slowly). Ironically, this observation comes from Larry Selinker [1972], the writer who coined the term "interlanguage". To accept this as an outcome of the teaching process would require a massive re-education not only of general public opinion but also of teachers' attitudes. So, even following the logic of proponents of the IL hypothesis, if the activity of teaching languages is to be defended, it is surely the duty of teachers (and applied linguists) to search for "therapeutic procedures" which would make it possible for the learner to "break through" to fluency.

Conventionally, teachers have taken this to mean correction of *expression*. The usual procedure is to ask the student to repeat the required form if he makes an error. Now according to Piaget, if the learner's current cognitive structures cannot already encompass the TL pattern, this would be an impossible requirement, for in a sense the learner would not even perceive the difference between his attempt and the teacher's model. The only utterances which would be modified in this way are performance lapses, to which the IL hypothesis attaches little consequence because they do not imply any faulty underlying grammar. Understandably, then, the effect of such correction procedures on the learner's subsequent performance is as singularly unsuccessful as are attempts to "train" infants in the acquisition of their native language by requiring repetition of adult forms. Fortunately, few people expect this of infants, for the simple reason that they have not yet acquired enough of the language to be able to cope with such a task.

It is worth looking at mother-tongue acquisition here, for infants are, after all, the most "successful" language learners. In contrast with the student learning in a formal classroom situation, the infant is generally "corrected" rather on points of

fact, i.e, *content* - and bad manners! After a careful analysis of adult responses to children's utterances, Brown, Cazden and Bellugi [1969, p.71] comment:

> *It seems, then, to be truth-value rather than syntactic well-formedness that chiefly governs explicit verbal reinforcement by parents. Which renders mildly paradoxical the fact that the usual product of such a training schedule is an adult whose speech is highly grammatical but not notably truthful.*

However, this is not to imply that adults never provide models. Parents do frequently say the required form in expanding or paraphrasing the child's utterances, as a sort of check on whether they have correctly grasped the child's intention. For example, if an infant said simply /bIk/, its mother might well ask "Do you want a /bIki/?" The infant need only indicate "Yes". The second language learner is expected to show much greater linguistic prowess, but in a classroom situation will probably still not get his biscuit!

The essential difference between the parent's and the teacher's approach to deviations from desired performance is that the parent respects the child's attempts at communication, whereas Holley and King [1971] observe that a student is discouraged by teachers insisting on accurate pronunciation and grammar. They noted that teachers will often provide a correct utterance immediately if a student hesitates, or cut off student responses even in mid-sentence if they deem them incorrect.

The reason for this is that the teacher takes *grammatical accuracy* as the criterion for "success", because of an apparently unquestioning acceptance that the TL grammar represents the surest way of communicating. I want to suggest that a good deal of our feelings of frustration and failure as teachers comes about because almost everyone assumes that the student will also accept the TL grammar as the goal. Let me quote just one example, from Corder [1971, p.149], to illustrate this:

> *The object of speech is normally to communicate, i.e. to be understood, If understanding is only partial, then a speaker has a motive to bring his behaviour into line with conventions of some social group, if he is able.*

It seems to me that Corder confuses two types of motivation here, only one of which will ensure striving for TL performance indistinguishable from that of a native speaker - that is social acceptance; the other kind is the much more basic drive to communicate.

Now let us look at the situation a little more closely from the point of view of the learner. Until he reaches a very advanced stage of learning indeed, the TL grammar must appear an impossible goal. Faced with a pressure to communicate, grammaticality must be a consideration the learner is only dimly aware of. For the learner, after all, grammar is no more than a vehicle for converting what he "can mean" into what he "can say" [cf. Halliday, 1973]. So his problem is to construct a communication system which is efficient enough not to place an impossible burden on

his cognitive processing capacity. For him, then, the primary consideration becomes what I call *communicative efficiency*. If the reader believes that this equates with grammatical accuracy, then he should ask himself where the logic is for a learner in the redundant "-s" inflection of the Third Person Singular Present Tense, or the Past inflection when a sentence starts with "yesterday", or the absence of the Infinitive marker *to* after *make*, when so many other verbs like *get, order, permit* and *allow* take it. Even transfer of native language patterns may be preferred if the TL structures appear to be unmotivated exceptions to a more general principle. In short, *provided the learner can make himself understood*, if the output of his simpler, more efficient communication system conflicts with the performance of native speakers, he may see no justification for making it more complex.

Now if one looks on "errors" as simply the direct outcome of attempts at communication, one arrives at a rather different perspective on their treatment than if one considers them as tests of grammaticality. My namesake, Jack Richards [1972], goes so far as to argue that, paradoxically, teachers may actually hinder the natural development of successful communication skills by insisting on perfect TL replications from the first lesson. If the teacher's and the learner's goals appear to be in conflict, the student is forced to adopt double standards: one for the classroom, and another for "real" communication outside. This is particularly clear with migrants who have been in Australia for several years. So sure are they of the validity of their own idiosyncratic dialects that I have actually had them correcting my English!

Is the solution to the paradox, then, to be found in accepting deviations in the same spirit as the child's non-standard speech, for which no blame is implied? This would mean substituting truth-value for grammatical accuracy as the over-riding criterion in determining appropriate feedback. At least communication, notably with classmates, would then become an immediate possibility, instead of a distant goal. Communication drives could go hand in hand with learning processes, as they do in the mother tongue situation, instead of being in conflict.

Compelling though the proposition may appear at first, it does not seem good enough to me. Coupled with the tendency now to present uncontrolled material in the interests of authenticity, it would be tantamount to saying that the best way to learn a language is "in the street", because students rarely make mistakes of fact. Unlike children, they are not learning "how to mean", nor are they discovering the world for the first time. Rather, they are learning to mean *in another medium*. I happen to value my profession enough to think that we must be able to do a better job than parents.

This is not to say that nothing can be learned from parents' tutoring techniques. Even before truth-value, the first priority for parents is intelligibility. Similarly, all corrective feedback presupposes that the teacher is able to place an interpretation on the student's utterance. If an utterance is unintelligible, the teacher must try to draw out the learner's meaning, as parents do through reformulation. In fact, a well-developed concrete situation may provide more guidance as to the learner's intention than his actual verbal behaviour, and this may be exploited by the learner as well in any new attempt at getting his meaning across. In this early phase, then, when "survival" is the key, the teacher simply

has to show in some way that he values a successful attempt at communication.

"Survival" gives way to a more elaborate "communication" which reveals the "inner man". At this stage, it is much more likely that a teacher will be able to place an interpretation on student utterances. The problem is to be sure that it corresponds to the learner's intention. The parents' tutoring procedure of expansion may prove useful here. For instance, if a student can manage only "Mr. Brown ... work", instead of insisting that he repeat the required form, the teacher would simply say, "Yes, he will be going to work tomorrow" - and move on. Holley & King [1971, pp.496-7] suggest various other rather obvious devices reminiscent of the tactics employed by parents to bring out their children's meaning, such as re-phrasing a question if the student does not understand at first, reducing it to a minimum number of content words (e.g. "Why did John come home so late?" ... "Why was he late?"), and "cueing" - providing a key content word as needed. But the intriguing thing about their study is the observation that in 50% of cases, if the teacher would simply wait 5-10 seconds when the student hesitated, no other remedial action would be necessary. Teachers might be amazed at what students can do if only they are given a chance.

The real challenge for language teachers, as I see it, arises at this stage, when as a result of such a training schedule, the student's attempts at communication are all intelligible, but some are still deviant. The problem, then, is to get students to accept "precision" as a goal without denigrating their considerable achievement in attaining some sort of communicative efficiency. Unlike the child, the second language learner may view a "fossilized" IL involving a minimum of redundancies and exceptions - a pidgin, in fact - as a way of asserting his ethnic background [cf. J.C. Richards, 1972], and we may never be able to change this. Because as much as 50% of messages may be redundant in some languages [George, 1972, p.57], his objective of making himself understood will generally be realised in spite of his errors. What the learner probably does not realise, however, is that it is not the individual error which is significant in itself. Rather, it is the cumulative effect of many errors which may interfere with the effective transmission of meaning by removing the protection against "noise" which redundancy ensures, to that extent making communication less certain or less precise [cf. Wilkins, 1974]. Furthermore, Johansson [1973] points out that even if an erroneous utterance remains comprehensible, violation of TL norms could make it irritating to a native speaker, thus provoking evaluational reactions that may classify the learner unfavourably. Consequently, if the second language learner has any desire for social integration, then in a final phase of learning we must try to superimpose "precision" on "communication" as twin goals.

A promising way of reconciling the two conflicting ideals is emerging with the development of functional accounts of language which show how grammatical form contributes to meaning [cf. Halliday, 1973]. This is not to suggest that a complete set of guidelines for a functional approach to the treatment of error has been worked out. In dealing with particular problems, much depends on the ingenuity and teaching skill of the individual.

Here it is simply proposed to outline a few principles which should inform such an approach.

What the conflict between communicative efficiency and grammatical accuracy does suggest is a scale for the gravity of specific errors. Instead of simply giving the "correct" sentence immediately after any faulty attempt by a student, the teacher might select a manageable number of "important" errors to work on first - the implication of which is, of course, that he would tolerate others in the meantime [cf. Burt and Kiparsky, 1972, p.7]. An "important" mistake in this context is the one in a set which most interferes with comprehension and thus communication. The rationale is dynamic, in that in any set of errors, it should be possible to determine which is the most serious. As a concrete example, Burt and Kiparsky [1972, p.5] consider the utterance:

- English language use much people.

There are three errors here:-

1. Omission of the definite article *the;*
2. Selection of *much* for *many;*
3. Incorrect word order.

To gauge the relative gravity of each error, they correct one at a time, viz.:

a) The English language use much people.

b) English language use many people.

c) Much people use English language.

Many native speakers would agree that the most marked improvement is in sentence (c), which indicates that, other things being equal, correct word order should be worked on first. Of course, the experienced teacher will be sensitive to his student's error regularities, and so will be able to say whether the student's problem is specifically with passive formation or more generally with word order. If the problem is with the passive, the teacher could agree, "That's true, the English language is used by many people", which provides the appropriate grammatical "trappings". If this is not sufficient, one technique I find useful is *contradiction.* If a student says, "I invited to a party", I say, "Oh, who did you invite?" This forces the student to use the Copula in contradicting my implication. From here, one can move in to some role play aimed at showing that the choice of Active or Passive is determined by whether one wants to highlight the role of the Actor or not, e.g.:

Situation A: Someone you aren't interested in phones to ask you to a dance.

Possible Responses:

i) I'm sorry, but I've already been invited.
ii) No, Henry has already invited me.

The Passive response is less devastating here, because it gives the impression that you really could not help it and does not reveal who you are going with.

Situation B: A student wins a car in a raffle.

Responses:
i) Guess what! John's won that car they were raffling!
ii) Guess what! That car they were raffling has been won by John!

Here the focus is on the Actor and his luck, so the Passive is less appropriate.

If the student's problem is more generally with word order, then the source is more than likely the mother tongue structure. This is really basic and may require quite drastic measures to convince the student of the tenacity with which English adheres to Actor-Action-Receiver word order in Declarative sentences. In this case, Burt and Kiparsky suggest various devices, none of which I find particularly inspired. The only one I will mention here is "own language distortions", in which the teacher translates the correct English sentence word-for-word back into the native language, thus making an error comparable to the student's own error, which they hope will focus his attention on the problem.

As has been observed, errors rarely destroy communication, particularly at this stage, but they may make an utterance ambiguous. If precision is the objective of the final phase of learning, ambiguity - real or potential - must consequently be hunted down at every opportunity. It may not take very much. For instance, if a student says something like:

- I want to know the English,

it may be sufficient to ask if he means "the English people" or "the English language" in order to draw the potential loss of clarity to his attention, even if the context makes it quite clear.

One final technique I have used, even when the meaning is relatively clear, is to deliberately misunderstand, in something like the following way:

Student: Yesterday I visit friend.

Teacher: Oh? So you visited your friends yesterday.

Student: No - friend.

Teacher: Sorry. You visited your friend yesterday. Then what did you do?

As well as clarifying the student's exact meaning, such a technique provides all the salient information that a student could derive from repetition of a teacher model, and is still provided with a model for a future occasion. A word of warning here, however, from Hanzeli [1975, p.432]: for such paraphrase techniques to work in the classroom, there must be a real situational and semantic bond (guaranteed in the example above by the "personalized" nature of the dialogue), which at present is unfortunately often lacking in lessons organized around a structural progression.

If the view is accepted, then, that errors are the direct outcome of attempts at communication, it seems that teachers could do worse than follow their own natural communication instincts.

The first consequence of adopting the changing and developing notion of communicative efficiency as the criterion for corrective feedback in place of grammatical accuracy will in fact be less frequent intervention in communicative activity by the teacher. But intervention there must be if ever the student is to acquire a socially acceptable form of English. Any techniques adopted by teachers will have in common the purpose of convincing the student that, for all its redundancies and exceptions, adoption of the system of English in the long run makes it more certain that he will be understood - and, incidentally, accepted.

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